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Naming “sensory equivalents” of established food products: Is the word wrong, or is it the world going wrong?

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Is a food name like *Halal-Ham* a blatant self-contradiction invented by unscrupulous manufacturers just to promote sales? Or is it an honest attempt to convey in a compact way the following subtle message: This is as close as you get to something that looks, tastes, and feels like ham without disobeying **a proscription against eating pork**? Similar opposing judgments could be made for *Cavi-Art* which denotes a product made of sea kelp that imitates “real” caviar, or *Pizzatop* which denotes a product developed to be put on top of pizzas exactly like “real” cheese, but which does not qualify as cheese. Starting from a review of 821 Danish regulatory cases concerning misleading food naming and labeling, we specifically address conflict scenarios that relate to the naming of innovative “sensory equivalents” to well-established food products. The arguments and assumptions put forward in real-life cases are transposed into more exact theoretical terms and related to current theorizing and empirical evidence on conceptual integration during our online interpretation of novel (unfamiliar) words. A key consideration is that the built-in semantic potential of composite food names is always ambiguous which means that the final interpretation is highly sensitive to additional cues on the surrounding packaging as well as to consumers’ prior knowledge and established cognitive schemas. Indeed, the cognitive schemas of some consumers may exclude the conceptual blends required by some innovative names, such as *Halal-Ham*, in that it would be tantamount to accepting that the “world has gone wrong” – so instead they maintain that the word is wrong. Pursuing research questions along these lines, we present the results of a pilot test assessing the degree to which varying the key parameters just mentioned may push the interpretation of the same novel name in different directions ranging from the potentially misleading to consumer acceptance.

Keywords: food naming, misleading labelling, innovation, conceptual integration